

December 2015/January 2016 | Volume 73 | Number 4

Co-Teaching: Making It Work Pages 68-72

Why We Got Serious About Interdisciplinary Teaching

Dana Haring and Tom Kelner

By co-creating projects that integrated language arts and social studies, we gave our middle school students richer literacy experiences and met Common Core State Standards.

During the last period of English language arts class on a spring day, a group of 7th graders sat down to discuss Emma Lazarus's poem "The New Colossus" (which is at the base of the Statue of Liberty). Considering that a majority of these students had social and academic challenges, including several who had individualized education plans, launching an intellectual discussion based on a close read of a historic poem seemed risky—and possibly even of limited value to these students. Adding to the challenge was the fact that this was an entirely student-led lesson.

We weren't sure conducting this Paideia seminar with this class was going to work. However, as an English language arts (ELA) teacher and a social studies teacher at the middle school level who were coordinating content and activities for certain projects, our motto had become "Ready, fire, aim."

During the discussion, which took place in Dana's ELA class but which we had co-planned, students who usually struggled with reading or writing showed evidence of deep reading, intellectual risk-taking, understanding of historical background, and use of academic discourse. As with most Paideia seminars, Dana had a prepared list of questions, but it only took one or two queries to get the students engaged with one another and the text. Dana's role became listening and taking notes as students asked questions, brought up points of interest or connection, and added to or refuted their classmates' additions.

One student, for example, wondered why in the poem's last line "I lift my lamp beside the golden door," the door was called *golden*. Student suggestions included things they remembered about Spanish explorers' search for gold on the North American continent, the gold rushes, and the idea that America was considered a land of riches by immigrants. Another student pointed out how *golden* was just one of many words in the text that referred to light or glowing.

This experience showed us the power of collaboration—both among subject areas and among learners. One student, a reluctant learner who'd previously been more concerned with eating his snack than with anything going on in class, had been deeply engaged, bringing up new ideas and making connections to what he'd learned in social studies. This young man approached Dana after class.

"That was fun today," he said simply.

We'd fired and had a direct hit!

Deciding to Collaborate

This kind of engagement from previously tuned-out kids didn't happen overnight. And it didn't happen by doing things the way we'd always done them.

Although the Common Core State Standards have been contested on both sides of the political spectrum, it was largely because of those standards that the two of us got serious about collaborating to give students experiences that would help them grow. When Tom realized that under these standards he'd be responsible for strengthening reading, writing, and research skills in social studies class, he nearly panicked; he realized he'd need help from someone with expertise in teaching reading and writing. He approached Dana, who taught English on his middle school team, and said that he was willing to make changes in his curriculum and instruction to support her efforts to teach literacy, but that he would need help.

From that time on, we have co-planned and co-taught at least two research projects every trimester. In addition, as we share students and strategies, there has been a constant flow of collaboration; we discuss how we're teaching a certain concept or

seek feedback regarding an instructional approach.

As we co-taught projects, each morning we discussed our plan for what students would do in both of our classes that day. At day's end, we'd discuss how the work had gone. If we perceived a weak spot or need for additional instruction for all—or even some—students, we adjusted the next day's schedule to include minilessons.

It made sense to combine our efforts to give students richer experiences with literacy skills using social studies content. We drew on Fullan's concept of "collective capacity," the idea that a sharper focus on a few agreed-upon skills and concepts helps educators "make the instructional changes required to raise the bar and close the gap for all students."¹

Starting Small

We started out slowly, collaborating on small lessons and projects. Dana joined in on some of the research work Tom's students were doing, adding additional language arts elements and standards as part of the requirements. For example, Tom and the librarian were teaching students how to conduct proper keyword searches and Boolean searches. Dana frontloaded this work with a lesson on asking meaningful research questions, so students could focus their research on answering these preprepared questions. Students had to give their answers to these questions in a well-structured paragraph and cite their sources in Modern Language Association format.

Our next collaboration involved all the skills and standards from the previous project with some important additions. Students had to research an entirely new topic, create meaningful questions, conduct research into their questions, develop a thesis, and put it all together into a five-paragraph informative essay. As the Common Core standards include literacy standards for social studies and other topics, this work met standards in both our subjects. Students addressed a range of topics connected with the pre-Revolutionary War era in American history, including the Englishmen's Bill of Rights, salutary neglect, and the Treaty of Paris of 1763. Students' arguments all pointed to the impact of their particular topics on the progression of historical events.

Co-Assessing and Co-Improving

We graded the resulting informative essays together. We chose six essays at random, and both of us read and graded all six, using a rubric that reflected both English language arts and social studies standards. We then discussed any significant differences in our evaluations to bring our expectations closer. After this norming process, each of us solo graded half the essays our combined students had produced. Tom accepted Dana's scores for his students' social studies grades, and Dana accepted his scores for her ELA grades. (In effect, each student received the same letter grade twice for this project, once for ELA and once for Social Studies).

After completing this project, we sat down and assessed what went well and where we needed to improve. We did this for each collaborative project, continually adjusting and strengthening our work. For instance, we came up with new organizational elements (like detailed checklists with completion dates for each element) to help guide students through a project's steps.

Communication was a constant. We would discuss any problems we'd noted, in the process or the final products, and then work collaboratively to create a solution for the next project. We also made sure to focus on the successful aspects of our collaboration by sharing particularly strong aspects of specific essays or pointing out the growth we saw in individual students.

We felt so strongly about how our approach was strengthening skills that the next year we added a co-taught argumentative essay and—one of our most successful efforts—a public speaking project. All our 7th grade students completed this public speaking project, which we used as a final assessment of their research and presentation skills. We paired students who were similar in their approaches to research; each pair created a five-minute PowerPoint presentation that they presented to the entire 7th grade team. Five teachers assessed each presentation, so students received immediate and diverse feedback.

Discerning—and Fixing—Problems Together

In spite of our success, we could see some weaknesses and challenges in our collaborative projects. Together, we identified necessary fixes. While co-teaching a project, we sat down weekly and discussed how our students were performing in each of

our courses, how they were progressing on projects, and how we could help each other. This involved crafting some scaffolding projects to support our weaker areas.

For example, in our third year of collaborating, we tried a scaffolding activity as part of the major speaking project; this activity helped build students' presentation abilities. We showed students a video of a country/folk song by Corb Lund called "Horse Soldier, Horse Soldier"—about horse soldiers and cavalry throughout history—then split learners into groups of four. Each group was assigned one stanza from the song to research, and each gave a short presentation on the historical significance of people mentioned in that stanza. Stanzas had varying numbers of historical references; we differentiated instruction by assigning students with stronger research skills to those stanzas with many references, and more challenged kids to stanzas with fewer. Some presentations were rough, others more polished. Either way, this activity helped students gain confidence and experience for doing their final project weeks later.

Our partnership has made both of us better able to teach important skills, partly because we got in the habit of seeking feedback and ideas from colleagues. After three years of collaborating closely on projects that connect our disciplines, we find ourselves discussing how to teach skills weekly—if not more often—with colleagues from different content areas.

Ways of Working

During our years of collaborating, certain practices and ways of working have become woven throughout our teaching and throughout our school. Here are three practices that we've found support collaborative teaching.

Develop Common Language

Our school district has developed common language across the curriculum to talk about reading and writing—terms informed by the Common Core State Standards. For example, our protocol for writing a strong paragraph is CEAL: claim, evidence, analysis, and leaving thought. All students in grades 6–12 use this same language to refer to reading and writing practices.

Our school, Kalispell Middle School, taught all staff members these terms and protocols. Kalispell serves 1,030 6th, 7th, and 8th graders; each grade level is divided into three teams of about 110 students. After all teachers had working knowledge of the terms, the administration partnered with key staff members to create a schedule for when teachers would implement literacy-related practices in all subjects (except math). For example, students in 6th grade social studies write informative CEAL paragraphs during the first trimester, progress to a full informative essay in the second trimester, and move on to argumentative writing in the third trimester. Collaboration among subject areas is strongly encouraged. Teachers use common rubrics to assess research and writing skills so students can better understand their performance.

With this common language in place, students understand expectations better, teachers use less instructional time to teach basic literacy elements, and collegial conversations flourish. We relied on these terms as we co-taught projects. Administrative support was crucial to this cultural shift.

Get Creative About Combining Classes

We learned that to accomplish our curricular goals, our students needed to have good amounts of class time together, and so did we—which meant we needed to play with scheduling. Because we were on a team of 7th grade teachers, we shared a common group of students. When we collaborated, we'd have our students spend both their social studies and ELA class time in the library or in one of our classrooms, researching or writing.

Sometimes we'd use part of that time to conduct minilessons for small or large groups of students, depending on student needs. We also considered individual student needs and interests as we paired and grouped students for cooperative projects.

We used graphic organizers geared to each project. For an essay, our graphic organizers helped students connect all ideas to their thesis statement and ensure that they included evidence; for a slide presentation, we gave them templates specifying what sorts of things each slide should include. For group projects, checklists helped students divide the work and keep track of one another's progress. Because of our flexible structure, common terms, and extensive organizers, we could group students who

weren't necessarily enrolled in the same class periods.

Co-Plan Creatively

Most schools, especially secondary schools, have fairly inflexible schedules and little time for teachers to plan together. We remained flexible about when we met to plan lessons, adjust a project in progress, assess student work, and conduct collaborative discussions. Some meetings were scheduled; some were not. Some were more formal; others were just as productive with a quick check-in or reflection before or after school. Because we shared the same schedule, we'd use snippets of time when we needed them, including brief chats in the hallway during passing periods.

The co-planning process we recommend is making time for what's important. It doesn't have to be formal, and you don't have to have an agenda. Meet until your questions have been answered or until you have a clear path to the next step.

Opening Classroom Doors

When our state adopted the Common Core State Standards, it was evident that business as usual wasn't going to be sufficient—that teachers were going to have to step out of their comfort zones, open their classroom doors, and work together to provide the best learning experiences possible.

As our work continued, we "advertised" what we were doing, letting the social studies department chair and school administrators know about our successes, inviting them to observe our work in action. Administrators appreciated what was happening with our students, and they became enthusiastic about promoting collaboration throughout the building.¹

Throughout our school, teachers now talk about how best to teach crucial literacy skills to students. As those conversations continue, our students are benefiting from increased opportunities for learning

Endnotes

¹ Fullan, M., & Quinn, J. (2010). *Capacity building for whole system reform*. Retrieved from www.michaelfullan.ca/media/13435862150.html

¹ Although this spread of collaboration benefited the school, it led to the undoing of our pairing. When our administrators changed the school's grade-level teams, they placed us on different teams to encourage wider adoption of collaborative teaching.

[Dana Haring](#) is an English teacher and [Tom Kelner](#) is a social studies teacher at Kalispell Middle School in Kalispell, Montana.